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ABSTRACT

This study examined the structure and function of student affairs research offices (SAROs) at American colleges and universities. A total of 35 SAROs completed questionnaires during 1995 in regard to their organization and its activities. Overall, the study found only a small number of SAROs in American colleges and universities, mainly at public research and doctoral institutions. While a few offices were found to be relatively large, the majority of SAROs were one-person operations working with a limited budget. The median annual budget for the 31 offices that reported budgetary data was $65,000, which included staff salaries. It was found that survey research was the predominant form of research methodology for most offices and that 19 SAROs were engaged in total quality management initiatives. Twenty respondents indicated that their research findings had been reported at professional or scholarly meetings in the past 2 years. While it was found that 15 of the offices had been created in the past 2 years, a number of SAROs reported suffering budget cuts in recent years. (Contains 13 references.) (MDM)

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The Structure and Function of Student Affairs Research Offices: A National Study

by

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The Structure and Function of Student Affairs Research Offices: A National Study

For some researchers, student affairs research is considered to be a proliferation of institutional research (IR) (Hearn & Corcoran, 1988). These authors argue that IR is increasingly being decentralized into other units on campus for one or both of the following reasons: (a) the claims of the centralized IR office are not accepted as legitimate across campus, or (b) the time and resources of the IR office are not sufficient to meet the needs of the entire campus constituency. For student affairs research, it appears that the latter is clearly the case. While much student related research is conducted in IR offices, these offices have very broad missions, much of which has little to do with student affairs issues. It is more likely that the academic concerns of the provost's or president's office will take precedent over the concerns of student affairs administrators. If the housing director wants to evaluate a diversity training program in the residence halls, how likely is it that the IR office will be able to assist? If the student activities director wants to conduct a survey of students to ascertain their needs and interest for programs and activities, will the IR office be able to administer the survey? More likely than not, the answers to these questions will be "No."

In recent years, several scholars and researchers have discussed the importance of conducting research in student affairs (Beeler & Hunter, 1991; Beeler & Oblander, 1989; Brown, 1986; Johnson & Steele, 1984; Kuh, 1979; Malaney & Weitzer, 1993; Thurman & Malaney, 1989), but there has been little emphasis on the work of individual student affairs research offices (Malaney, 1993; Moxley, 1988). While one might argue that assessment and evaluation, not "research," are the real foci of such offices, even the latest assessment manifesto (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), while an excellent resource, fails to discuss in any detail the work of student affairs research offices.

It is very likely that the lack of emphasis on student affairs research offices in prior literature is due in part to the fact that the number of such offices is small. Johnson and Steele (1984) and Beeler and Oblander (1989) found that only 12% of the colleges and universities reported having a student affairs office whose main function was research. And a follow-up by Karl Beeler on those 12% of the respondents in his study produced a list of only 26 institutions (4.6% of the sample) having a true student affairs research office, meaning an office consisting of at least one person whose primary responsibility was conducting student affairs research.

Given resources and research expertise, there is a large variety of evaluation and assessment activities that student affairs divisions would conduct. Almost twenty years ago, Kuh (1979) argued that such activity should be conducted in student affairs research and evaluation offices, and today, existing offices are conducting such studies (Malaney, 1993; Moxley, 1988). Until this study, Malaney and Moxley provided the only documented accounts of individual offices. The purpose of this study is to provide a more detailed account of all known centralized student affairs research operations. "Centralized" is a key term, because like the proliferation of IR activities into other campus offices such as student affairs, student affairs itself has seen a proliferation of its own research activities into other student affairs offices like admissions, housing, and career services. The focus of this study is on the centralized research activity within student affairs, even though that activity may be housed in a decentralized student affairs office and not be under the direct purview of the senior student affairs officer (SSAO).

Method

One might think that locating student affairs research offices would be an easy task, especially when the two major national organizations, American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), have research divisions as part of

their structures. But before this study, no one had ever compiled a list of such offices. In the Spring of 1994, inquiries were sent to the individuals on the Beeler-Oblander list to update their information and provide names of other possible student affairs research offices, and as a result, a few changes and additions were made. Announcements also were posted on two student affairs listservs, CSPTALK and NASPA-I, which garnered a few more additions to the list. Discussions at ACPA and NASPA conferences were helpful in expanding the list, as was an announcement in ***Passages***, the newsletter of ACPA's Commission IX on Assessment for Student Development. By Winter 1995, all of these inquiries yielded a list of only 39 offices.

In April 1995, a survey instrument was mailed to all of the offices on the list. After three follow-ups during the Summer of 1995, responses were obtained from 37 offices. Of those 37 responses, two had to be excluded: One had recently been transferred to academic affairs and the other had been eliminated due to campus budget reductions. This meant that 35 out of 37 possible offices returned usable surveys, for a response rate of 95%.

Results

The Respondents – Where They Are and Who They Are

In the study by Beeler and Oblander (1989), all except one of the 26 student affairs research offices were located in research or doctoral institutions, as defined by the Carnegie classification scheme. While those offices are included in this study and clearly make up the majority of offices, a substantial number of offices are located in other types of institutions. The breakdown of the 37 offices by institutional type is as follows: 15 Research-I, 6 Research-II, 3 Doctoral-I, 2 Doctoral-II, 10 Masters-I, and 1 Baccalaureate-I. All except three of these institutions are public institutions.

As Figure 1 shows, the offices also are fairly well spread out across the country. Eight are located in the West, with five in California and one each in Arizona, Hawaii, and Washington. Five are

in the Midwest, with one each in North Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Missouri. Seven are in the Mideast, with three in Ohio, two in Illinois, and one each in Michigan and Minnesota. Twelve are in the South, with five in North Carolina, three in Texas, and one each in Arkansas, Alabama, South Carolina, and Virginia. And finally, five are in the Northeast, with two in Maryland and one each in Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts.

[Place Figure 1 about here.]

The individuals in charge of the research operations have varying job titles, but the most common title is director (n=15), followed by assistant or associate vice chancellor or vice president (n=6) and coordinator (n=4). Other titles include dean, assistant to the vice chancellor or vice president, and research assistant or associate. As one might expect, all of the respondents have advanced degrees. Of the 31 respondents who completed the education section of the survey, 25 have doctorates and 6 have master's degrees as their highest educational degree. The respondents' doctoral degrees are in the following fields: higher education (n=10), psychology/applied psychology (n=8), educational psychology or counseling psychology (n=3), educational administration (n=1), sociology (n=1), political science (n=1), and English (n=1). The median actual reported salary (or midpoint of the reported range) of the person in charge of a research office was $50,125 (n=28).

How They Are Organized

Respondents were asked to indicate, by title, to whom they reported. Thirty-one of the positions were highly centralized within the student affairs organization, with 20 reporting directly to the SSAO (of which 15 were titled vice chancellor/president), 6 reporting to an associate vice chancellor, and 5 reporting to an assistant vice chancellor.

While a few of the offices are quite large, the typical office is a one-person shop working on a shoe-string budget. Twenty-one respondents reported that their offices consist of one professional (not

necessarily full-time) with little or no support staff. (A few of these offices had some part-time clerical or student help). Five other offices consist of only one professional but also have at least 1 full time equivalent (F.T.E.) of clerical or student support. The median annual budget for the 31 offices that reported budgetary data was $65,000, which included staff salaries.

Thirty of the respondents answered an open-ended question about how the research operation's budget has fluctuated and impacted on research activities in the past five years. Three of the offices were relatively new and thus had stable budgets. Several of the small offices actually have no operating budgets, and they receive money to do projects on an "as needed" basis. Consequently, most of this group reported level-funded budgets. In total, 13 of the 30 respondents reported that their budgets had remained stable over the past five years. Two other offices actually reported increases; however, 15 offices reported budget cuts. Reductions were clearly the norm for the largest offices, some of which reported budget cuts of between 20 to 40 percent, resulting in staff reductions, fewer computer upgrades, more contract and grant work, and less research conducted overall. Of course, many of these cuts can be attributed to budget reductions suffered by most public higher education systems across the country during the few years preceding this study.

Respondents were asked several questions about research administration. Generally the person in charge of the student affairs research office determines what type of research is conducted (n=21). Others reported that the SSAO (n=7), committee (n=1), or someone else (n=6) has that primary responsibility. Respondents reported working with various other campus constituencies when conducting research. Of course, all offices reported working with other student affairs offices, but 33 respondents reported working with other administrative offices outside of student affairs and 26 reported working with academic departments. Interestingly, only 19 offices reported working with student organizations.

What They Do

Not surprisingly, survey research is the dominant research method for most offices, with mail surveys being more popular than telephone surveys. All 35 offices have conducted survey research within the past two years, with 34 conducting mail surveys and 24 conducting telephone surveys. A variety of other research methods also were utilized in the past two years: institutional data base analysis (n=32), focus groups (n=21), content analysis (n=16), observational studies (n=9), and experiments (n=7).

All of the offices conduct surveys of both on- and off-campus students, and 23 offices conduct surveys of graduate students. Eighteen offices also conduct surveys of faculty and staff. Twelve offices conduct surveys of other colleges and universities, and 3 offices conduct surveys of local community residents. The number of surveys conducted by each office varies considerably: from zero to 20 telephone surveys per academic year (median = 1.5) and from zero to 30 mail surveys per academic year (median = 2).

Respondents were asked a few other questions about the type of research activities they undertake. For instance, they were asked about conducting TQM-related research on campus. It turns out that 19 of the campuses are engaged in TQM initiatives, but only six of the offices have conducted research related to those initiatives. Program evaluation studies are fairly popular, with 27 of the offices conducting such studies within the past two years. Interestingly, a few of the offices have conducted some larger scale studies within the past two years: eight conducted state-wide studies, 3 conducted regional or multi-state studies, and 5 conducted national studies.

In terms of disseminating results, most offices (n=23) prepare formal written reports and do oral presentations on campus. All offices routinely report findings to the SSAO and the office or person who requested the study. Thirty offices report findings to the general campus community. Eleven offices

report their findings to the local media, and 15 offices report findings to interested parties across the country.

Respondents also were asked about the scholarly use of their offices' data. Twenty respondents reported that their research findings have been presented at professional or scholarly meetings or conferences in the past two years. These meetings include the Association for the Study of Higher Education, American Association for Higher Education, Association for Institutional Research, NASPA, and ACPA. Nine respondents reported that their findings have been published in scholarly journals in the past two years. The journals include ***NASPA Journal***, ***Research in Higher Education***, ***Journal of College Student Development***, ***College Student Affairs Journal***, ***and Journal of Freshman Year Experience***.

Conclusion

Both positive and negative indicators stem from this study. From a student affairs view, the biggest negative is that such a small number of student affairs research offices could be found. While there may be a few more offices out there, it is unlikely that the number is large. What does that say about the profession? Perhaps one of the respondents said it best:

> I know there is within Student Affairs a mis-understanding or a dislike of research and program evaluation. . . . I wonder how strong these feelings are on other campuses. . . . I suppose the fact that there are so few "researchers" in student affairs says something about the acceptance -- lack of acceptance.

The "misunderstanding" or "dislike" of research is likely to be due in part to the lack of emphasis placed on research in student affairs graduate programs. While Hunter and Beeler (1991) and Brown (1991) have recognized the need for graduate programs to do more within their curricula, they also realize that adding a course or two in research will not create researchers. Graduate programs have a wide

agenda, and research is but one competency area to be addressed within a typical 12 to 16 course structure for a master's program. Doctoral programs can be (and should be) somewhat more focused on research, but too often a two-course requirement is all that is expected in those programs, as well. This background hardly prepares one to do a dissertation let alone focus on research as a career. Accordingly, Hunter and Beeler, as well as Brown, have called for graduate programs to form partnerships with practitioners in order to build research expertise within student affairs. If a student affairs research office could be developed at each institution housing a student affairs graduate program, the number of offices across the country would triple. Graduate programs might then focus on helping other local colleges in their surrounding areas.

Another negative uncovered by this study is the extent of the budget cuts suffered by some of the offices. At least two major student affairs research operations were eliminated in the past five years. Fortunately, the office at Bowling Green State University, home of a major student affairs graduate preparation program, has been reinstated. While the other office has experienced some revitalization thanks to a new president, it has not been fully restored. The former head of that office indicated that his office existed from 1984 to 1991, and in 1991, the university retrenchment eliminated 200 positions. He noted, "I guess that our research was deemed to be no longer necessary given financial exigencies."

This study does offer several reasons to be encouraged. For instance, fifteen of the offices in this study were created within the past five years, a time of serious budget retrenchment in institutions of higher education across the country. It also is encouraging that 31 of the offices in this study exist on campuses that additionally house offices of institutional research. One might assume that those campuses truly value the student affairs research perspective. This is not to say that campuses that run student-based research out of their IR offices do not appreciate such research. Usually, the perspectives and emphases

are just different when the office is housed in academic affairs or the president's office versus student affairs.

Another positive is that current interest in student affairs research seems to be quite high. Over the past seven years, several individuals from campuses across the country have approached this author about starting student affairs research programs. Some of those new programs are represented in this study. Conversations at national student affairs conferences have indicated strong interest and support for student affairs research offices. The current NASPA Executive Director Gwen Dungy is extremely high on student affairs research. All of these indicators point positively in the future direction of student affairs research.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Location of student affairs research offices.

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